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AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN BRAZIER

BY HOLLIS FRENCH

Silver braziers were in use in England early in the eighteenth century, and possibly earlier, for they were spoken of during the reign of Queen Anne. They were first made without handles, and consisted of a pierced cylindrical body standing on feet usually provided with wooden balls to protect the table. Charcoal was probably lighted and dropped into the brazier, through the pierced sides of which sufficient air was obtained to maintain the ignition. The coals rested on a round pierced plate, below which was a small space into which the ashes dropped.

Silver workers are well aware of the fact that burning charcoal does not affect the surface of silver deleteriously, and that the patina is unaffected by this fuel, whereas ordinary coal is apt to have some sulphur content which has a most injurious effect upon silver. Charcoal was therefore, no doubt, the fuel used in these utensils, until the use of the spirit lamp displaced the brazier by the introduction, about the time of George II, of dish-crosses and the later chafing-dish.

In America, where the style followed that of England, we find braziers made without handles by John Coney and various other workers early in the eighteenth century; but most of these utensils were furnished with a wooden handle and were of the type shown by the piece in the Exhibition. This has three feet resting on wooden balls, and is of graceful shape with decorative body piercings. The plate on which the coal rests is of a geometric design and is easily removed by means of the bolt with a nut below, thus offering access for cleaning. From the lip spring three silver scrolls to support the dish, and the whole piece is as beautiful as it is useful.

John Potwine, its maker, was born in Boston, in 1698, where he worked some time at his trade, moving about 1735 to Hartford. He lived to the ripe age of ninety-six and died at East Windsor, Connecticut, in 1792. His first wife was Sarah Jackson, and he subsequently married Elizabeth, widow of Captain Abner Moseley. The brazier was probably made before he left Boston, for it was found in the possession of a family whose ancestors lived in Boston. It is of course possible that it might have been made by him while in Hartford, for his later account-book shows that he was in communication with Daniel Henchman,

a Boston silversmith, to whom he sent silver dollars, and he might, of course, have kept up some of his Boston trade. As this type of brazier, however, went out of style about the middle of the eighteenth century, the piece can probably be dated before 1750.

OUR FIRST MODEL: "THE DESERT"

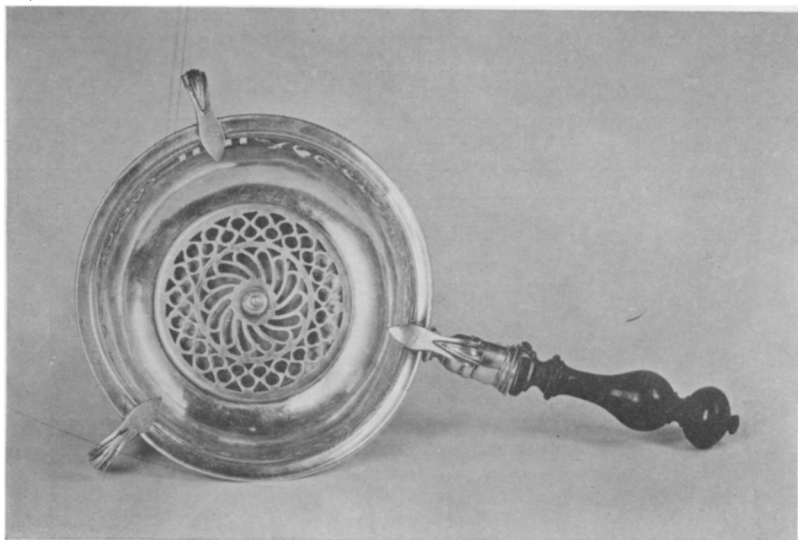
Halfway down the corridor in the Educational Department the Desert Model made by Dwight Franklin is installed. It was presented to the Museum by the Misses Holden, and it has proved to be a great attraction. The children take it very seriously. To them it is a genuine bit of life in the African desert. The clouds, the trees, the sand and the desert people are real.

Mr. Franklin has selected for his foreground an open, level stretch of sand with a tiny oasis to the right. In the background, two other forms of desert country are shown. Rolling sand-dunes pile up towards the horizon to the left, while at the right crumbling cliffs rise out of the sand. From between the sandy hills at the left two riders have emerged. It is a bridal party which has distanced the rest of the long caravan just appearing, tiny in perspective, at the horizon. The man rides ahead with his long musket over his shoulder. The servant, who has been leading the bride's camel, is stooping over the tiny pool. The bride has a tent contrived for her on the camel's back, with huge panniers at either side. Only her brown face peeps out in answer to her husband's announcement of a halt.

The oasis has only five trees, a few bunches of dry sand-grass and the little spring of water reflecting the hot blue sky overhead. It could not provide for an encampment. Travelers may pause there but may not remain.

In this model, as in the many others he has made for various museums, Mr. Franklin has given a very real glimpse of an interesting country. The effect of sand-hazy atmosphere is secured by means of a filmy, pale blue gauze stretched over the foreground. The overhead lighting is arranged to give the impression of noonday under vertical sun rays. The people at the pool and the distant line of laden camels help one to realize that this silent, bare, hot desert is after all one of the great highways of the world.

H.G.



Silver Brazier by John Potwine
Lent by Hollis French